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ABSTRACT

Past research indicates that people employ different strategies to manage others' impressions; however, conditions which make these strategies effective remain unclear. Using a sample of college students (N=345), the effectiveness of self-presentational strategies on influencing others' attributions of causes for expected and unexpected helping behavior was investigated. Each subject read a scenario containing one of the six combinations of the independent variables (high or low expectancy, modest, neutral, or boastful claim, and gender of subject). Results indicated that, consistent with past research, a modest claim engendered more favorable trait ratings on all traits, while unexpected behavior led to more favorable ratings only on those traits most closely related to the helping behavior. A modest claim elicited more internal personal disposition causes for helping whereas expected helping behavior led to more external situational attributions. The findings suggest that unexpected behavior tells more about the person and that a modest self-presentation is more effective. (Author/JAC)

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Effects of Self-Presentational Tactics on Others' Attributions To Causes for Expected and Unexpected Helping Behaviors

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Running Head: Reactions to Self-Presentational Claims for Helping Behavior

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EFFECTS OF SELF-PRESENTATIONAL TACTICS ON OTHERS' ATTRIBUTIONS TO CAUSES FOR EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED HELPING BEHAVIORS

What are the conditions that result in a favorable reaction to boastful or modest claims for helping behavior? Past research (Schlenker, 1980) indicates that we employ different strategies to manage others' impressions; however, conditions which render them effective remain unclear. This study investigated the effectiveness of self-presentational strategies on influencing others' attributions to causes for expected and unexpected helping behavior.

Evidence shows that individuals often claim personal responsibility for favorable outcomes and deny responsibility for unfavorable ones (Sicoly & Ross, 1977; Arkin, et al, 1976). Miller (1975) and Weary-Bradley (1978) propose that self-serving biases and self-enhancement motives account for these attempts to accept or deny credit for behavior. Whatever the reasons, Schlenker (1980) suggests that we "acclaim" responsibility for desirable outcomes by using "entitlings" to maximize our personal responsibility for the action and "enhancements" to maximize the desirability of the event itself. What factors contribute to our choice of an appropriate self-presentational tactic? Others' beliefs regarding the perceived costs for engaging in the behavior and the likelihood that others would have behaved similarly should be important.

Theoretical explanations have been offered to explain why unexpected helping should elicit attributions to personal causes. Jones and Davis (1965) characterize action taken at high costs as low in assumed desirability and suggest this out-of-role behavior (unexpected) is more telling about

the person. Support is provided by Jones, Davis and Gergen (1961). When job applicants appeared to describe themselves in a manner that was obviously not in their best interest to match themselves with the job, subjects were more confident in attributing greater personal dispositional causes to them than to other applicants who described themselves to fit the job requirements (in-role behavior).

A more complete attributional framework is provided in Kelley's (1967) covariance model which also incorporates expectancy information. Consensus information (how many others are expected to behave similarily), together with a knowledge of the action's past behavior in similar situations (consistency) and related situations (distinctiveness information) influence attributions to internal or external causes depending on the combinations of levels of each. McArthur (1972) has shown that a combination of low consensus (unexpected behavior), high consistency, and low distinctiveness is most likely to lead to internal personal dispositions, while high consensus (expected behavior), high consistency, and high distinctiveness prompts attributions external situationsl causes for the behavior.

Consistent with McArthur's findings and Jones and Davis' theory, if an observer believes that someone has helped when others would not have (low consensus), then the observer should predict the helper would assist in other types of situations when help is needed (low distinctiveness). On the other hand, if the observer believes others would also have helped (high consensus), then he or she should be less likely to predict the helper would assist in other types of situations (high distinctiveness). However, both unexpected and expected helping should lead to predictions that the person will help again in a similar situation (high consistency) either

because of personal traits or because the situation demands it (expected).

If then, when help is needed, and most everyone would likely assist, the action should less likely be attributed to a personal trait or dispositional cause than when the behavior is exceptional and unexpected. Therefore, when behavior is not unusual, individuals should use entitlings, and enhancements to convince others that the action was indeed exceptional and that they deserve personal credit for their benevolent action. In fact, research indicates (Schenker & Schlenker, 1975; Baumeister & Jones, 1978) that individuals use acclaiming tactics when credit does not appear to be forthcoming. Accordingly, Schlenker, Miller, and Leary (1981) found that self-enhancement is most needed after success when it is possible observers would unlikely credit the performance to the actor. However, when credit is clearly forthcoming as in the case of heroic behavior, we need not insist on claiming personal traits as causes, but instead, may fair better by presenting a modest claim. Schneider (1969) has found that a modest claim does indeed bring favorable reactions and still enables the claimant to retain personal responsibility for the act. Conversely, boastful claims may engender resentment (Tesser, et al, 1968). It has not been determined, however, if these self-presentational tactics effectively influence an audience's attributions to favor more personal disposition causes rather than situational ones.

It appears then, from the evidence, that when individuals perform a desirable action they will often attempt to present a claim which will: (1) engender liking themselves, and (2) attempt to influence others to believe the action was motivated by personally desirable traits (internal causes) rather than situational factors (external causes).

The purpose of this experiment was to investigate observers' reactions to an individual's modest or boastful claim for performing either an unexpected or expected helping behavior. Subjects were presented with information regarding a hypothetical actor's boastful, modest, or neutral reply to being thanked by a person whom they had helped in a situation. The expected helping situation was one in which most others would have helped, while the unexpected helping occurred in a situation where others would not have likely helped. It was predicted that consistent with past research, a modest claim would elicit more favorable trait ratings than a boastful one or a neutral claim (which should fall intermediate). An additive effect of expectancy and claim should occur such that a modest claim for unexpected helping should elicit the most favorable trait ratings especially on those traits directly related to the helping behavior (e.g., helpful, caring, and unselfishness).

The effectiveness of self-presentational tactics should depend partly upon the perceived motives for the claim. A review of research by Eagly and Himmelfarb (1978) revealed that arguments against one's own best interest are more effective for increasing credibility and changing opinions than arguments that appear to be self-serving. Therefore, the apparent less self-serving modest claim should influence observers to attribute the helping behavior more to internal personal causes and less to external situational factors than the neutral or boastful claims.

As well, in the modest claim, the helping behavior should be seen as most commendable. A boastful claim, when perceived as such, should be least effective for "entitling" and "enhancement" purposes.

Consistent with Jones and Davis (1965) and Kelly (1967), unexpected helping should elicit more personal disposition attributions than expected

helping which in turn should prompt more situational explanations as causing the action.

Finally, based on Kelly's (1976) covariance model and McArthur's (1972) findings, unexpected helping (low consensus) should lead observers to predict that the helper would be more likely to assist in other types of situations (low distinctiveness) than when the behavior is expected (high consensus). Observers' predictions on the consistency dimension should not differ as a function of expectation.

Method

Subjects.

Three hundred and forty-five (173 males and 172 females) undergraduate students participated in a 2 (expectancy: high v. low) x 3 (claim: modest, neutral, or boastful) x 2 (sex of subject: male/female) completely randomized factorial experiment with approximately equal numbers assigned to each condition.

Procedure.

Each subject read a scenario containing one of the six combinations of the independent variables. The scenario depicted a college student (Bob) overhearing two fellow students discussing a problem one had in getting home that day. Bob then offered the student a ride knowing that he would be late for dinner since the student lived "well out of his way" (low expectancy) or would not be late for dinner since the student lived "right on his way" (high expectancy).

After accepting Bob's offer and arriving at the student's home, the student thanked Bob saying, "That was an awfully generous thing for you to do...I don't know what I'd have done without you."

The second independent variable was introduced at this point by having Bob claim in the modest condition,[1] "It was nothing really...you needed help... no big deal."; for the neutral claim, "Thanks, but you needed help. In such a situation I felt like I should"; and in the boastful condition, "You're right...you needed help...I guess I must be special to help someone in a situation like this."

Manipulation Checks.

After reading the scenario, subjects completed a questionnaire containing the manipulation checks and the dependent variables. All responses to questions were rated on a nine-point scale with appropriate labels (e.g., ranging from "not at all" to "extremely likely", with the exception of one manipulation check for claim, and dependent measures of trait attributions to Bob, which were rated on a seven-point semantic differential.

Three questions assessed the effect of the expectancy manipulation: (1) "To what extent would you expect individuals to help in such a situation?"; (2) "How much of an inconvenience was it for Bob to help?"; and (3) "What is the likelihood you would have helped in the situation described?" The effect of claim manipulation was assessed by subjects rating Bob from 1=boastful to 7=modest, and two items asking subjects to rate how they thought Bob felt about the helping. On the first, they estimated Bob's feelings on the extent to which he thought others should help in such a situation, and on the second, the extent that he felt situational factors were important in causing him to help.

Dependent Measures.

Trait Attributions. On the semantic differential, subjects rated Bob

[1] A pilot study (N=30) indicated that each statement elicited the intended label of modest, boastful, and neutral (neither modest nor boastful).

on traits labeled (1) unlikeable-likeable; (2) bad-good; (3) unhelpful-helpful; (4) untrustworthy-trustworthy; (5) weak-strong; (6) selfish-unselfish; (7) worthless-valuable; and (8) undependable-dependable; and (9) uncaring-caring.

Internal/external attributions. Subjects rated the importance (1="unimportant cause for helping" to 9="important cause for helping") of "personal factors" (things about Bob) and "situational factors" (things about the situation.)

Entitlings and enhancement. Subjects ratings on the importance of "personal factors" indicated the personal credit (entitling) they assigned to Bob. On an item asking, "How commendable was Bob's act of helping the student?", subjects rated the desirability of the event (enhancement).

Predictions to consistency and distinctiveness. Subjects predicted consistency by rating "the likelihood Bob would act the same way in a similar situation", and distinctiveness by rating "in other situations where someone needed help."

Results

Manipulation Checks

The expectancy and claim manipulations were effective with the exception of the neutral claim which did not differ significantly from the modest claim. Each were rated as equally modest. Consequently, subsequent results and discussion are concerned with comparisons between only two levels of claim: modest and boastful.

The multivariately significant main effects, $F(3,324)=6.97$, $p < .0002$, for the three items measuring the expectancy manipulation were univariately

significant as well. Low expectancy (LE) subjects (M=5.6) believed others would be less likely to help than high expectancy (HE) subjects (M=4.3), $F(1,327)=38.55$, $p < .0001$; that it was more inconvenient (Ms: LE=6.1; HE=1.8), $F(1,327)=364.82$, $p < .0001$; and that they (LE) would be less likely themselves to help (Ms: LE=5.4; HE=6.6), $F(1,326)=35.62$, $p < .0001$.

The multivariately significant main effects for claim manipulation, $F(6,650)=3.03$, $p < .006$), were univariately significant as well. Compared to the boastful claim (BC), modest claim (MC) subjects rated Bob as more modest (Ms: MC=5.4; BC=3.0), $F(2,324)=73.71$, $p < .0001$; thought that Bob felt situational factors were more important (Ms: MC=517; BC=3.0), $F(2.327)=4.28$. $p < .01$, and that "Bob felt that everyone should help in such a situation", (Ms: MC=5.7; BC=4.9), $F(2.327)=4.95$, $p < .007$.

Dependent Measures

Trait Attributions. A multivariate ANOVA computed on the nine trait ratings revealed significant main effects for expectancy, $F(9,301)=3.16$, $p < .001$, and claim, $F(18,604)=4.66$, $p < .0001$. As shown in Table 1, subjects in the MC condition rated Bob as more likeable, dependable, and caring than those in the BC condition. As hypothesized, only the directly related traits of helping, caring, and unselfishness were significant for main effects of expectancy.

Insert Table 1 About Here

When helping was unexpected (LE) Bob was rated more favorably on all three (ps. $< .001$) than when it was expected (HE). Means and F values are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Internal and External Attributions. Results on attributions to internal and external causes supported the prediction that a modest claim would elicit more internal (personal) factors as causes, $F(2.326)=6.50$, $p<.001$, (Ms: MC=6.7; BC=5.9). However, there was no main effect for expectancy as predicted. On the other hand, subjects' ratings on the importance of external (situational) causes revealed the predicted main effects for expectancy but did not confirm the predicted effect for claim. High expectancy behavior was seen as more situationally causes than low expectancy behavior, $F(1,327)=10.68$, $p<.001$; indicated by means of 6.5 and 5.9 for HE and LE respectively.

Although the claim manipulation did not affect ratings for the perceived importance of situational factors, it did affect the observers' impressions regarding the desirability of the event itself. Helping was seen as more commendable when Bob was modest, suggesting that claim influenced attributions to "enhancements", $F(2,327,=6.51$, $p<.002$; (Ms: MC=6.8; BC=6.1). As well, when the helping was unexpected (LE) it was seen as more commendable than when expected $F(1.327)=6.00$, $p<.01$; (Ms: LE=6.9; HE=6.4).

Covariance dimensions. Surprisingly, when his helping was expected, Bob was seen as more likely to help in a similar situation (high consistency), $F(1.327)=3.96$, $p<.05$. Means were 6.6 and 6.2 for HE and LE, respectively. As predicted, results indicated a main effect for distinctiveness. When subjects had not expected Bob to help the student, they predicted he would be more likely to assist in related situations (low distinctiveness) than when it was expected that he would help $F(1,327)=4.30$, $p<.05$; (Ms: LE=6.5; HE=6.2).

Sex differences. Unanticipated sex differences were found. Surprisingly, female subjects reported that they would be more likely themselves to help in the situation than did males $F(1.327)=5.07$, $p < .03$; (Ms: F=6.3, M=5.7). Compared to males, they also rated the helping as less inconvenient $F(1,327)=11.73$, $p < .0007$; (Ms: F=3.0; M=3.7), and regarded situational factors as a more important cause for Bob's helping $F(1,327)=7.00$, $p < .008$; (Ms: F=6.5, M=6.0).

Males, although they didn't regard Bob as more boastful than females, did rate Bob's expectancy for praise as a more important cause for his helping $F(1,327)=9.76$, $p < .002$; (Ms: M=4.3; F=3.5), and felt that his action was less commendable $F(1,327)=15.24$, $p < .0001$; (Ms: M=6.3; F=7.0).

Discussion and Conclusions

As predicted, the modest claim elicited more favorable trait ratings than the boastful reply. This finding supports previous research by Schlenker (1980) which suggests we are inclined to like someone more when we perceive they do not engage in self-enhancement tactics. Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) provides a reasonable explanation for this negative reaction to boasting in suggesting that we resist persuasion when we believe others are trying to manipulate our beliefs or opinions for duplistic motives (e.g., to gain praise).

Results of the expectancy manipulation on trait attributions imply that unexpected behavior influences attributions to traits most specifically related to the type of behavior performed. These findings support the notion that out-of-role behavior tells us more about the person (Jones & Davis, 1965) but also that we are specific about the attributions inferred from the unusual behavior.

Observers' attributions to internal and external causes supported the prediction that a modest claim would elicit more internal (personal) factors as causes for the behavior, but claim did not affect observers' beliefs regarding the contribution of situational factors prompting the helping behavior. Conversely, when helping was expected, situational factors were regarded as more important than when helping was unexpected. However, attributions to personal causes remained constant regardless of whether the helping was expected or not. It appears perhaps that the perceived low inconvenience imposed in the high expectancy condition was the situational factor regarded as important in facilitating the stimulus person's helping. This explanation is further supported by the subjects' judgments of helping in the high expectancy condition as being less inconvenient.

Although claim did not affect ratings for the importance of situational factors, it did affect subjects' impressions regarding the desirability of the event itself (enhancements) and personal credit awarded (entitlements).

When Bob was modest, helping was seen as more commendable, suggesting that self-presentational tactics may influence others' attributions to enhancements by increasing the perceived desirability of the event when the claimant plays down the significance of the helping. Correspondingly, the modest self-presentational claim influenced subjects to attribute more importance to personal causes which "entitled" Bob to more credit for the performance, while a boastful claim only served to cost the self-enhancing claimant personal credit for the behavior. These data suggest that a modest claim effectively servers both entitling and enhancement purposes, whereas the observers' expectancy of the helping, which is usually not under the claimant's control, only influences the perceived desirability of the event itself while not influencing the entitling process.

When asked to predict Bob's future helping behavior, subjects apparently based their estimates at least partly on consensus information, i.e., their expectancy that others would also have helped. Surprisingly, when his helping was expected, subjects predicted Bob would be more likely to help in a similar situation in the future (higher consistency) than when helping was not expected (low consensus). This finding, though unanticipated, is consistent with subjects' perceptions of the importance of situational factors when behavior was expected. Perhaps because of the relatively low inconvenience imposed for helping in the high expectancy condition, the helper, like anyone else, judged to be likely to assist in a similar situation.

As hypothesized, unexpected helping (low consensus) led to predictions that Bob would be more likely to help in related situations when help was needed (low distinctiveness). This finding provides support for the notion that if a combination of low consensus and low distinctiveness lead to more personal dispositions, low consensus alone should lead observers to predict the helper would be likely to assist in related situations (low distinctiveness).

Finally, female subjects regarded the helping as less inconvenient and more attributable to situational factors. These findings are consistent with the explanation that the low cost of helping when it was expected was perceived as an important situational factor prompting the benevolent action. It would also explain the higher rating of females on their likelihood of themselves helping. Males apparently were more skeptical of Bob's motives for helping, evidenced by their higher ratings as expectancy for praise as an important motive for Bob's helping behavior. This perceived self-aggrandizing attempt may also explain why males felt the helping was less commendable. This finding suggests that when an ulterior motive is perceived as an attempt to gain credit, such a self-enhancing claim may have the opposite effect

intended. No explanation is offered for why males rated Bob less favorably when the helping was expected.

From the results of the study the following conclusions were reached. First, a modest self-presentational tactic effectively increases one's personal responsibility for helping and maximizes the desirability of the event itself, especially when one would have been expected to help anyway. Secondly, either because the cost is minimal or helping is expected, one is perceived to be likely to help again in the same situation. Finally, unexpected behavior (low consensus) tells us most about one's personal traits that are directly related to the behavior, and enables us to generalize that the person would be likely to help in other related situations when help is needed.

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Table 1

Mean Trait Ratings for Claim

Trait Dimensions	Claim Condition		Claim Main Effect F-ratio*
	Modest	Boastful	
Unlikeable-likeable	6.1	5.0	26.89
Bad-good	6.1	5.4	12.49
Unhelpful-helpful	5.7	5.3	11.62
Untrustworthy-trustworthy	5.4	3.0	5.97
Weak-strong	5.8	5.3	8.42
Selfish-unselfish	6.3	5.7	32.40
Worthless-valuable	5.7	5.3	9.63
Undependable-dependable	5.3	4.6	7.85
Caring-Uncaring	6.0	5.3	9.92

*df = (2,320)

Note. Higher means indicate a more favorable rating. All means differ by at least $p < .001$.

Table 2

Subject Ratings on Traits Directly Related to Helping

Trait	Means for Expectancy of Helping		Expectancy Main Effect F - ratio*	p value
	High Expectancy	Low Expectancy		
Caring	5.6	6.0	9.92	< .006
Unselfishness	5.4	6.0	18.14	< .0001
Helpfulness	6.0	6.3	5.79	< .02

*df = (1,320)

Note. Higher means indicate a more favorable rating.